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Bolivia: Why Garcia Meza Remains in Power [REDACTED] . . . 9

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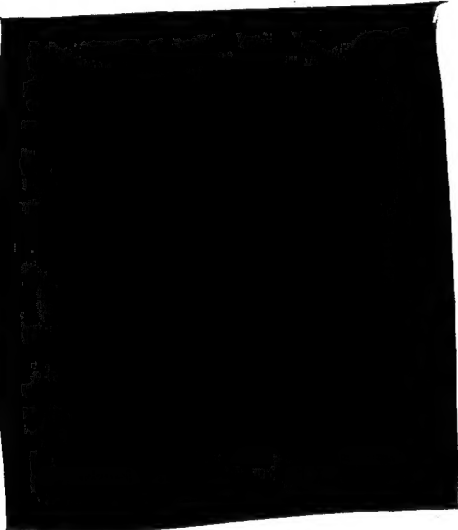
The general continues in office more by default than design, since the myriad of military coup plotters has so far been unable to unite behind a single officer or secure support from key troop commanders. [REDACTED]

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ii  
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BOLIVIA: WHY GARCIA MEZA REMAINS IN POWER



General Garcia Meza continues in office more by default than design. The myriad of coup plotters in the military has so far been unable either to unite behind a single officer or to secure the support of the key regimental commanders in La Paz. Garcia Meza's backing, however, is tenuous and any shift in the present set of loyalties is likely to force him from power.

Currently, several factions within the military are jockeying for position. Until recently, the most prominent was led by General

Natusch--who headed an abortive coup in 1979--in league with former President Banzer. Late last month, however, the government briefly detained Natusch and placed Banzer under virtual house arrest, thereby disrupting their timetable. In the interim, other factions began making serious preparations for a coup, with each joining in the attempt to garner critical military support.

The unflagging ambitions of Bolivia's inveterate military plotters has worked to Garcia Meza's advantage. All want to occupy the presidential palace and refuse to settle for anything less, but none has enough strength to mount a successful challenge alone.

In large part, the essential element is the active help--or at least passive acquiescence--of key regimental commanders in La Paz. These units at present remain tenuously in Garcia Meza's camp, largely because he has bought their loyalty. The regimental commanders are

8 May 1981

~~SECRET~~

not personally loyal to Garcia Meza, however, and would quickly switch sides if they decide that one of the plotters has gained widespread support or that Garcia Meza's largesse is dwindling.

Some among the regimental commanders also harbor presidential ambitions. Most notable is Colonel Doria Medina, head of the most powerful unit in the country and chief of the new antinarcotics task force.

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At a minimum, he is a key power broker whose willingness to tackle the drug problem--which many Bolivian military leaders believe makes him more acceptable to the United States--may translate into backing for his presidential aspirations.

At present, Garcia Meza's best hope to improve his chances for longer tenure would be to achieve a normalization of relations with the United States. The Bolivian military attaches immense significance to close ties with the United States and, in fact, all the plotters specifically claim that they are moving against Garcia Meza primarily because he cannot secure US approval. Garcia Meza must, therefore, achieve this goal before the patience of his supporters runs out or his enemies unite--clearly an increasingly near thing.

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8 May 1981

10  
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